

Autism Speaks™ Loudly at Andrews High School
By: Kendra Newman, Health Science Teacher and HOSA Advisor

This is a story of the dream of a young lady, who wanted to become her high school homecoming queen and the profound difference that dream made in one South Carolina high school. Janaiy Heyward is an autistic young lady that I met last year as a student in the health science program. This year, I heard from other students that Janaiy wanted to run for homecoming queen. One day before spirit week, I asked Janaiy about her dream. She replied, “Oh, Mrs. Newman that is all I want. . . .to be the ‘queen.’ I have been waiting all summer for this chance!” I said, “HOSA will help you if that is what you want!” At that response, she smiled from ear to ear. I called her mother for permission to allow HOSA to help with this project. Her mother was on board and gave her support. Remember this was all her daughter talked about over the summer. I spoke to all my classes about our new project to support Janaiy and become her campaign managers. The majority of the students were very open to the idea.

I had reviewed Autism Speaks™ material over the summer trying to find a way to incorporate a project to promote student involvement. Supporting Janaiy’s dream felt like the right thing to do. I wanted to create an opportunity that was more than just raising money. We need money to find a cure for autism. But first we needed to establish common ground to educate the student body about autism before we could entertain the idea of a fund raiser.

It started.

A few days before spirit week, a very exciting time for the students, the Andrews High School HOSA chapter began work on the campaign details. Spirit Week involved a daily theme, students dress up, and at the end of the week, the student body votes for the king and queen. The king is revealed at the pep rally on Friday; the queen is announced at the halftime of the football game that night. During the week prior to spirit week, the health science students’ lessons were planned to allow extra minutes each day for brief planning meetings. HOSA chapter officers assumed the leadership roles of planning and coordinating the project. Another student (HOSA member) not currently in this class would attend the 2nd block class when she was serving as a teacher assistant, just to be a part of the planning. By the Friday before spirit week, every detail had been worked out. There was a football player to sponsor her, candy with quotes taped to them for her to give out during the week, and a basket for the candy. One student even had necklaces made out of beads and had little yellow jackets (our school mascot) added that read, “Have a nice day, vote for Janaiy!” It seemed like the whole class came together for the greater good; it felt rewarding to be a part of it. The class had purchased over fifty dollars worth of candy to distribute for her and one student made Rice Krispy Treats® to give out the day morning that everyone voted. HOSA made over fifty posters for Janaiy that were displayed all over the school — just like all the other competitors. The posters were hung by students in my 4th block class the Friday before spirit week, so that on Monday they would be visible for all to see! Everyone was getting a good education on the definition of autism and people were starting to ask questions. The campaign project was positive and the school atmosphere was even more positive. As the health science teacher and HOSA advisor, this was a life-changing experience — to be able to educate the school about autism and assist in making one young lady’s dream of campaigning to be the school’s homecoming queen come true. It was no longer about just winning, but now it was about Autism Speaks™. The reward was witnessing the school learning about the complex disease.

Some students still did not understand what autism really was, but they were totally on board with the purpose of helping Janaiy. I wrote a poem in terms I thought the students would be able to understand to help explain autism:

*“Autism Speaks”
Autism is like a pyramid.
There are many sides to it
That makes it unique.
No one else understands and most of all
It is difficult to SPEAK!
The waves of emotion are like
The tides of the oceans
They can be wild with rage
One minute and calm as a summer
Tide the next.
So, come join HOSA, as we speak for
“Janaiy”
That the words will convey the
Message of all our hearts
that “autism speaks”. This
Was not her choice by design but
One given to her by the Devine,
SO, you can help by making it
Your choice to be her voice!*

The poem seemed to help the students understand a little better. When they made the posters, they used this poem on them for the entire school to read. It made sense to me, if my students understood about autism; then maybe they could help others to understand also. We created a puzzle piece border around our class and HOSA message board. We even had a bulletin board called “Autism Speaks,” which included a yellow background with a huge blue puzzle piece in the middle that read “school spirit” and the word “autism” spelled out in small puzzle pieces on top and on the bottom the word “speaks” spelled out. Janaiy readily brought pictures of herself and her friends to put up on our board. During this time, Andrews High School held an open house. I got to meet Janaiy’s mother. She was “beyond excited” about all the HOSA activities in support of Janaiy’s campaign. We exchanged contact information and the very next day she sent Janaiy to school with more pictures to hang on our bulletin board.

Each day Janaiy stopped by our classroom to chat and to see if anything was different. She would get her candy to pass out like the other homecoming hopefuls. It is difficult to express in words the feeling that was beginning to spread around the school about Janaiy. The fact that she had autism appeared not to matter; during this week, she was no different than anyone else in the school. Through this project, we managed to educate an entire student body about autism and work on the dream of one homecoming hopeful.

There was rumor of one negative comment made by a student about our Janaiy. It was amazing how many people got upset about the comment and they were at Janaiy’s defense. We tried to keep this negative comment from Janaiy. As a teacher, I do not know if she heard about it or not. If she did, it did not break her spirit at all. Even the special needs students were in an

uproar about the negative comments. They were all given a mini-lecture about “the good outweighs the bad and in the end the better person wins.”

Friday night, the big football game and the culminating event, we had all been waiting for this week, had finally arrived. The team was winning and after the 2nd quarter ended, I left my post at the front gate to go watch the halftime show. I took my colleagues’ children along with me, in exchange for them watching my post. I HAD to see the halftime show. I was nervous and excited. I was not positioned where I could see Janaiy’s mother’s reaction, but I later learned about it from my husband who witnessed her reaction firsthand. She had tears running down her face in suspense. After they called the runner-up’s name, it was time to announce the winner.....Janaiy Heyward’s name was called out. Her mother danced in her seat and her excitement was uncontrollable. The entire student body was cheering loudly and tears were being shed; not for sadness but out of joy! This student’s dream had an extremely happy ending. It was beautiful and overwhelming to experience this little piece of history being made in small town, Andrews, South Carolina.

You see....with a little bit of education and a whole lot of dedication, the HOSA chapter made a profound impact on the students at Andrews High School; they learned that “Autism” really does “Speak”.

